



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

PART 2

‘HEMPREPRENEUR’

SEAMS’ member Claire Crunk launches Trace Femcare, sees promise in natural hygiene product

(Note: In part 2 of our series on hemp fiber, we catch up with SEAMS’ member Claire Crunk, founder of Southeast Hemp Fiber and Trace Femcare. In our last edition, we [featured Bear Fiber](#) and founder Guy Carpenter.)

By Devin Steele

It took burnout, a lot of soul searching and numerous lightbulb moments for Claire Crunk to find her way into the realm of hemp fiber. But here she is ... on her way, perhaps, to building a successful niche and potentially large business and a fulfilling career in the hemp world.

A world that’s far away from the one she had spent her 10-year career, as a nurse practitioner, until 2018.

But one thing appears certain: She has done her homework, possesses intuitive and learned business savvy and has a caring spirit for others and the planet. And, given a seemingly tireless work ethic and a rapidly growing network – many connected through SEAMS – that has helped her find her way as a hemp entrepreneur (“hemprepreneur?”), great promise exists for her endeavor.

Crunk launched Southeast Hemp Fiber four years ago, which led her down a path to found a company, [Trace Femcare](#), created to produce a hemp tampon that is expected to be the only U.S.-grown hemp fiber brand, she said. The absorbent core is a blend of hemp fiber and regeneratively grown cotton, while the applicator is 100% hemp biopolymer without any petroleum additives, which make it the only brand using a 100% plant-based applicator that isn’t cardboard, she said. She aims to launch the first product late this year or early next year as funding continues to grow and FDA hoops are cleared.

Why hemp tampons? From a scientific standpoint, hemp is rapidly renewable and naturally healing to air and soil and is safe for landfills, oceans and composts, she said.

“On an esoteric level, my hope is that Trace gives people a way to learn about, connect with and love better our earth that gives us all we ever need,” Crunk said. “That emotional connection and gratitude for nature’s gifts is what will motivate us to take better care of it so that way our grandchildren have a world that is more beautiful than it is today. More practically, on a big-picture level, my hope is that Trace creates an economic driver for regenerative agriculture and circular design at a scale that pressures other brands to fall in line.”



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Things are moving along well in technical development, and the company has overcome some of its biggest early hurdles, she said.

In the near term, plans are for the company to launch a second product in year two or three. A big long-term hurdle is bringing full production to the United States, she said. Currently, most of her vendors are domestic, but her actual primary manufacturing partner is in Europe, as “there is zero capacity for contract tampon manufacturing in the U.S. for orders under several million dollars,” she noted.

“Our manufacturing partner is the best in the industry, so I hope our brand can prove that there is a runway for them and our other value chain partners for natural fiber hygiene products produced fully here,” Crunk said. “This is part of why I really value the SEAMS community – for the networking and mentorship in tackling these big problems.”

Crunk has built a deep knowledge and relationships with key stakeholders and partners such as Guy Carpenter of Bear Fiber in Wilmington, N.C. – who she met through SEAMS – and all of whom are crucial to Trace’s success and are its greatest asset, she said.

“We are responsible for building literally all sourcing pathways from the ground up,” she said. “But the work will pay off – I guarantee you that no other femcare brand can tell their farmers what sort of tillage is optimal to grow tampon fibers or can tell their customers the exact farm origin of their materials. The ability for Trace to tell that story authentically resonates big time with our target customers and differentiates us as standout, proactive industry leaders.”

Trace Femcare recently joined a consortium of U.S. apparel and home goods brands to support cotton grown regeneratively in the United States by agreeing to purchase certain amounts pre-competitively, direct from the farmer and gin, Crunk said.

“So since we will be using only U.S.-grown hemp and this special, regeneratively grown cotton in our blend, Trace is officially the most sustainable and traceable feminine hygiene brand in the world,” she said. “We are super excited about this partnership with values-aligned apparel and home brands. It is an opportunity for us to really walk the walk in perpetuating agricultural practices that will actually heal the earth, which is our mission.”

Hemp seed to be used in Trace products is going in the ground soon, and the company has begun the prep work towards its FDA-approval process, which it expected to take six to 12 months, she noted. She added that she has added two new team members and will high school interns this summer to run a TikTok account.

In a pre-seed/seed funding round, Trace has raised and secured \$245,000 of the \$395,000 needed so far, and the company has exclusivity partnerships with a few key players in its supply chain, Crunk said.

“Once that round closes, I can officially say we have investment partners,” she said. “Equity-wise, though, I am still the only holder. I am hoping to bring on a person who can lead brand strategy and

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marketing, but I am learning that finding a work wife is FAR harder than finding a real husband,” she added with a laugh.

Circuitous route to the hemp world

How Crunk got to this point is an interesting story. She was born and raised a county over from her current residence in middle Tennessee and, as the first in her family to go to college, graduated from Birmingham-Southern College with B.S. in Biology and earned a Master’s of Nursing degree specializing in women’s health from Vanderbilt University. She served as a women’s health nurse practitioner (NP) for 10 years, owning her own clinic in a rural county for four of those years while also doing a lot of global medical mission work with refugees and sex-trafficked women.

She also taught as an adjunct faculty member with several nursing programs, served on the Alumni Board at Vanderbilt, published work around NP-owned practices and engaged in legislative advocacy for full-practice authority. She also briefly served in the public health sector.

But things would change after a decade in this field.

“Healthcare is absolutely brutal,” she said. “Perhaps the general public realizes this now more than ever. Most caregivers go into healthcare because they are intelligent, curious people who feel called to serve others at their most vulnerable. It is intellectually challenging, emotionally taxing, self-sacrificial and physically exhausting ... and very little is in their control. Our system is built to make money, yet caregivers are rarely given the space to influence how that money is made. In short, they carry the totality of responsibility for revenue generation without an ounce of decision-making power. This way of a martyr-type work environment is why burnout and suicidality rates are so high in the profession. So, I burned out, and this was a huge personal crisis for me.”

Crunk would quit her job, but not without a sense of guilt for “abandoning my patients and the profession,” and regret for “having spent so much on an education that I paid off just four years prior,” she said. “I eventually came to realize that my role as a women’s health NP – my job – does not define who I am, despite how emotionally attached I was to it, and I am grateful for how it served my life. There is a time and a season for all things.”

The burning question after burnout, of course, was “what’s next?” And a happenstance meeting at a concert pointed her in the direction of her current venture. And having moved with her husband and three children into a farmhouse on a “hobby farm” outside of Nashville, Tenn., she grew “closer to the earth,” which played a role, too, she said.

“We fell in love with being in the dirt and connecting with nature and learning how to live in symbiosis with it,” Crunk said. “This introduction into farming, agriculture, gardening and living off the land brought me to hemp. Around the time of my professional identity crisis, I was thinking about what our next farm project would be, and I met a representative from the Tennessee chapter of a hemp association at a music festival who gave me a sample of (hemp derivative) CBD, a brochure about the association and the hemp industry and an invite to the organization’s next meeting. He would later become a colleague.”



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During that turning point in her life, Crunk visited a friend – an attorney-turned corporate farmer – for some “therapeutic girl time” on her 8,000-acre farm, where she was introduced to her friend’s onsite merchandiser and USDA inspector. One night, Crunk shared her interest in hemp with her friend, who recommended she look into the processing side of agriculture as a business opportunity.

When she returned home, she began researching hemp processing and realized there was another side of hemp (for fiber), so she experienced her first a-ha moment, she said. “My women’s health brain immediately thought about a hemp tampon. As part of that idea, I started doing research about hemp fiber availability, and I very quickly learned that there was none in the U.S. So, I naively thought, ‘okay THAT’s what I am going to do!’ I saw buzz about hemp fiber, people all over the internet talking about how awesome it could be and how there are farmers wanting to grow it and people wanting to buy it and a how there was a total gap in the value chain at the processing level. I knew there weren’t any fiber processors, so that was my white space. But I am not a ‘sit around and talk about it forever’ kind of person.”

With the idea fresh, the first person she called was then-SEAMS’ President Jeremy Wootten, president & CFO of textile manufacturer HomTex, Inc., as she was close friends with his wife Sadie from college. She asked for his advice on hemp fiber processing and the market and how the textile arena operates. They had a good chat, Crunk recalled, and he invited her to the SEAMS’ Fall Networking Conference, which happened to be kicking off in Nashville the next day.

“I hung up the phone, called Nancy (Kinderknecht, SEAMS’ business manager) to register, then immediately called the printer to make business cards,” Crunk said. “I literally made up the name ‘Southeast Hemp Fiber’ in my car while on the phone with the printer and had never even touched hemp fiber.” (Although the next day at the meeting, she met MMI Founder and President Amy Bircher, who showed her the first hemp fiber she would ever lay hands on.)

Wootten also connected Crunk with Carpenter, who was “probably the most important introduction of my professional life,” she said. “Guy has always been so generous and gracious with me, but especially then. I was a total stranger, and a very naïve one at that, and he taught me almost everything I know about hemp.”

That SEAMS’ meeting proved to be fruitful for Crunk, she added.

“I met so many members that day in Nashville, and I felt immediately welcomed,” she said. “I’ve been a newbie in a lot of circles since then, and the SEAMS crew is by FAR the most helpful, collaborative, generous, kind – and fun – group. I feel a deep gratitude for everyone for that time – it was totally unearned grace.”

That was valuable to her during a time of personal crisis, especially, as she was searching for a greater purpose, she pointed out.

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“It was my first exposure to the loneliness of entrepreneurship and the barriers to building something from nothing and what going ‘off book’ in life can feel like,” she said. “So, that SEAMS encouragement was like oxygen. My extended family didn’t really understand. My husband, Adam, was supportive because he wants me to be happy, although I’ll admit that he didn’t really see Southeast Hemp Fiber as legitimate at first. We fussed a lot about it because it was never profitable, but now we joke that I should have named it the ‘Crunk Hemp Charitable Foundation.’ ”

The initial premise of Southeast Hemp Fiber was to build a hemp fiber processing facility in West Tennessee to produce spinnable fiber for the apparel and home use fabrics industry, she said. But Crunk had a lot to learn about those industries, how fabrics are made, the people involved, the economics of it, the markets, commodities, soil science, regulations, banking and insurance restrictions on hemp, brand and consumer demand for hemp fiber, how to process it and the equipment needed.

“It was such an early time for the industry, and I was one of the very first ones to really attempt to build this type of business in the U.S.,” she said. “I spent tens of thousands of dollars travelling to see hemp fields, shopping processing equipment, attending conferences, enrolling in fiber courses and travelling to meetings ... and just learning. Because of my full-time effort and the timing of it all, I kind of accidentally became a leader in hemp fiber knowledge.

“So while Southeast Hemp Fiber was literally developing markets for hemp fiber in order to back in to the financing of the facility, it also took on some consultancy roles for competitors and textiles folks,” she continued. “I didn’t really have any other mission than to just get it done and meet the needs of manufacturers and brands to source the fiber and to teach downstream folks how to grow what we needed. It wasn’t very revolutionary or fancy – just straight up agriculture and manufacturing and grit – with a giant price tag.”

COVID alters course

Last year, 2020, was going to be the kickoff year to raise those funds, until something called COVID-19 came along, she said. She was at an agriculture conference meeting with Farm Service Agency reps about export opportunities for hemp fiber on the day Tennessee announced its first coronavirus case, she recalled.

“A month later, it was clear that 2020 would not be the year for forward movement in my company,” Crunk said. “Seed was stuck on boats unable to clear customs in time to get into the ground. Investors were NOT excited about talking major equipment financing for an unproven entity, while fashion and retail were tanking. Natural fibers took a giant back seat to synthetics as the scramble to produce PPE ramped up – and thank God for that.”

At that same time, there were around 15 other hemp fiber processing facilities trying to kick off, and she was getting good intel that a few had a good shot of making it, she recalled. So she decided it would be best to pivot back to her original idea of a hemp tampon.

“By this time, I had a pretty good handle on the benefits of regionalized production and made in USA and the urgency of building for sustainable/circular products,” she said. “So I wanted to translate all the



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concepts of regenerative fiber systems and traceability I learned from the textile industry's efforts in sustainability to the tampon industry, which isn't close to anything I've seen in feminine hygiene."

By that point, she was engaged with and involved in INDA, the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry, where she had clients seeking hemp fiber.

"From that, I already had a pretty good idea of what steps needed to happen to develop product, how to manufacture it and modeling of raw material sourcing needs," Crunk said. "My healthcare background has made FDA navigation a bit easier. So, as a brand, we have to be pretty heavy handed and work intimately with our supply chain partners as well as put actual skin in the game – a.k.a. time and money – to produce the fiber itself, which is an added challenge because our competitors who use cotton or rayon can easily source the exact specs they need and build corresponding financial models from a commoditized crop that's had 100 years to figure it out."

Regarding challenges, the equipment to produce tampons is designed to churn out millions of pieces per day, so finding a manufacturing partner who has any capacity available and is willing to both do low MOQs and shut down the line to clean it after running hemp production was difficult, she said. And hemp is a new, natural product beholden to weather, data gaps and inconsistencies, so it carries risk, she added.

"It's good timing on a macro level as investors are trending towards impact investing aligned with audit-worthy Sustainable Development and Governance Goals, the notion of regenerative agriculture is gaining steam and our customers are more privy than ever to greenwashing and exploitive labor practices," Crunk said. "Brands can't just hire a token sideline Sustainability Director anymore and win favor with consumers. Oh, and tampons are an essential, good consumable, and pandemic proof. It's the perfect time for Trace."

Low environmental impact

Crunk pointed out that there isn't an actual technical benefit to using hemp over cotton or rayon in a tampon. But there are technical merits to hemp fiber itself that are demonstrated in data such as microbial resistance, fungal resistance, breathability and sorption rates that may theoretically be advantageous to tampons, she said.

"We are purposefully not going down that road for our tampons and are designing the product to function exactly like existing tampons on the market," she said. "This is important for safety and regulatory reasons, and we want to do everything right when it comes to the FDA. Perhaps future development post-revenue can involve more looks at any potential health benefit, but for now we are focused on biocompatibility and absorbency. It is important to note that our fibers and tampons contain zero cannabinoids or CBD. The fiber is inert. I think there are many consumers who want tampons with therapeutic effects from CBD or THC, but that would definitely give the FDA a stroke."



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Where hemp tampons shine is in their environmental impact, Crunk pointed out. Feminine hygiene products are made with non-biodegradable synthetics and irresponsibly cultivated natural materials (with a few exceptions), she said. The production and disposal of these products hurt the environment.

“Remember, those Gen Z women are greenwashing detectors and plant mommas who eat organic food!” she said. “Our tampons relate to the environment in a whole new way.”

She added that she sees Trace not as a tampon company but as a regenerative agriculture company, where tampons are just the conduit. “By replacing synthetic and some of the natural materials in conventional tampons with hemp cultivated to our standards, our product is carbon-negative,” she said. “Hemp is exceptional at atmospheric carbon sequestration and carbon sink building; in short, it heals the air and soil.”

Another advantage of hemp that is particularly special to Crunk is that its fiber production is giving new opportunity to U.S. farmers, she said. Part of her passion for this is to sell goods that generate revenue so it will pull through farm-gate purchase agreements at advantageous prices for farmers here at home, she noted.

Crunk added that she is proud to be part of a burgeoning – and once illegal – industry with so much potential.

“Hemp is not just for hippies, stoners or closet home-growers anymore,” she said. “My father-in-law even wears a hemp vest to work!”

While burnout, an identity crisis and an interest in farm projects brought Crunk to hemp, she really dug in because she saw it as a business opportunity, she said. “But now I am a full-on hemp lover, hook, line and sinker. The more I learned about the plant, the more I fell in love with it. I have officially morphed into the hemp-loving hippie that I promised Guy I wasn’t!”